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The American Institute of Sacred Literature

A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON JESUS IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

This reading course is prepared for the use of ministers, Bible teachers, and general readers who wish a convenient means of acquainting themselves with the recent results of biblical study regarding Jesus. The outline of topics, of which the fourth and last appears in this issue, has previously considered the sources of information about Jesus, his life and teaching as determined by modern critical study of the sources, and the early Christians' interpretation of Jesus. The course is being conducted by SHIRLEY JACKSON CASE, of the New Testament Department in the University of Chicago, to whom readers may refer for further consideration problems which have been suggested by the reading. Inquiries regarding books, traveling libraries, and issues of the BIBLICAL WORLD containing previous outlines should be directed to THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE.

IV. THE MODERN CRITICAL ESTIMATE OF JESUS' SIGNIFICANCE FOR RELIGION

Modern writers hold different opinions regarding the forms of thinking and the phraseology which ought to be used to express Jesus' worth for religion today. Many interpreters contend that we should start with the thought of God and his relation to the universe, and then find Jesus' worth by setting him in this scheme predetermined by some metaphysical theory. According to this method Jesus' chief significance is found in his revelation of God to men. In him God became manifest in more sensuous and tangible form. By noting his conduct and his words recorded in the Gospels successive generations are able to learn what God is like, how he acts, and what he wills for humanity.

This general way of approach does, indeed, vary according to the particular type of metaphysics entertained by the individual interpreter. In ancient times when the earth was thought to be the center of the universe, and the heaven above was a stationary vault with perforations through which angels and spirits passed in realistic fashion, it was easy to picture Jesus in the language of the most realistic supernaturalism. But this possibility has become increasingly more difficult in recent

times. Man has now become more skilful in "thinking God's thoughts after him"; consequently the naïve supernaturalism of primitive peoples has given place to a clearer comprehension of an orderly universe and the uniformity of natural law. For instance, formerly any unusual display of nature's forces, as might be experienced in a meteorological disturbance bringing destruction to human life on land and sea, appeared to be a direct visitation from God, a miraculous expression of his displeasure. Nowadays the natural causes of these happenings are well known, the events themselves are anticipated, and instead of being miraculous it would rather be a "miracle" if, under given conditions, they did not happen.

In other words, there is now a strong tendency to place less stress upon externalism in estimating religious values and to emphasize more exclusively the so-called spiritual realities of religion. And Jesus, in this connection, is still chiefly significant in bringing a revelation from God to men; yet the content of the revelation is not to be sought in his miracles—not even in the tradition of his miraculous birth and resurrection—but in his personal influence upon the lives of his contemporaries and in the spiritual enlightenment of his teaching. His life of loving service for humanity, his unique sense of sonship to God, his power to inspire followers to emulate the godlike life, are the proofs of his supremacy.

A third way of approaching him would not set any type of metaphysical speculation in the foreground but would direct attention solely to his historical individuality. His worth, accordingly, is not thought to be conditioned upon what he brings from God to man, but upon his power to bring men to God. Since Jesus was the uniquely successful seeker after God, and thereby became the true spiritual Son of God, he continues to be the "Way, the Truth, and the Life," helping believers to realize in their own experience true sonship to God. Thus Jesus' significance for modern religion is found in his own personal religious life rather than in the fact that he early became the object of worship among believers.

This third method of interpretation has not yet been worked out at length in any single treatise dealing exclusively with this theme, though it has often been expressed incidentally in various works. The recent *Hibbert Journal Supplement* entitled "Jesus or Christ?" contains a series of valuable essays representing different points of view, but serving very well to introduce one to the main problem of this whole discussion. Of the books chosen for careful examination in our further consideration of this topic, all employ more or less extensively the category of super-

naturalism as a means of estimating Jesus' religious worth for moderns, though the type of supernaturalism used is not always the same. These books are J. Denney, *Jesus and the Gospels: Christianity Justified in the Mind of Christ*; J. Warschauer, *Jesus: Seven Questions*; W. Sanday, *Christologies Ancient and Modern*.

Denney's is one of the most recent books interpreting Jesus in the traditional manner, yet with some concessions toward modern objections to the crasser supernaturalism of the older forms of christological speculation. Thus the author in his conclusion claims that every Christian should be at liberty to construct his own Christology, and that no philosophical presuppositions should be made fundamental to faith. Still he would require every Christian to take the same attitude toward Jesus that the early believers took, and this, as defined by Denney, implies that moderns must think in terms of the primitive Christians' world-view, since everyone who would have genuine Christian faith must make a "surrender to the impression of the supernatural" in Jesus' person. It is quite impossible to concede to moderns, as Denney seemingly professes to do, perfect liberty in the matter of metaphysical theories and yet to demand this "surrender." It will add greatly to our understanding of the author's exposition of his theme if we recognize at the outset that he is writing in the interests of this demand.

The book advocates two main propositions: (1) Christianity from the first has existed only in the form of a faith which has Jesus as its object, and not at all as a faith which has him as its living pattern. (2) Jesus assumed for himself the position which faith has given him. Each of these assertions is seriously questioned by many modern writers, as we have already noted in our previous study. We have found interpreters like J. Weiss pointing out that the most primitive type of Christian belief fixed its reverential thinking not so much upon the earthly Jesus as upon the expected heavenly Christ, and only gradually, as the hope of his coming was deferred, did an interpretation grow up which saw in the earthly Jesus those peculiar traits at first associated with the coming Christ. Furthermore, many students urge that the most primitive phases of gospel tradition show Jesus to have claimed no divine prerogatives for himself but only a hearing for his message by which he sought to direct men toward the Father.

Denney, on the other hand, rejects these modern opinions in favor of the traditional view. He defends his first proposition by a brief survey of Christianity as it is exhibited in the New Testament books, more particularly with reference to the Christology of these writings. In this

the author refuses to follow recent forms of investigation which find in the New Testament the thought of the second and later generations of Christians, and which would look for the beginnings of Christian doctrine in reflections of earlier views to be detected here and there in the present tradition but to be distinguished from the main lines of New Testament Christology. This distinction is held by Denney to be quite impossible and imaginary. Similarly Jesus' claims for himself are not differentiated from the disciples' claims for him. This thesis is defended, on grounds alleged to be strictly historical, by an examination of the tradition about Jesus' resurrection and a survey of his teaching as reported in the Gospels. As a result of this investigation, Jesus' significance for religion today is based upon the "unreserved recognition of the place which Christ has always held in evangelical faith." This estimate has always been bound up with a supernaturalistic world-view, and the author of this book in guarded language makes fundamentally the same type of thinking a prerequisite for the modern estimate of Jesus' worth.

Warschauer's purpose is primarily doctrinal rather than historical, but his answers to doctrinal questions are based upon a frank consideration of the results of critical study. The book treats seven questions about Jesus: Was he the son of God? Was he sinless? Did he work miracles? Could he forgive sins? Is belief in him necessary to salvation? Did he rise from the dead? Did he die for us? The question of his divine sonship is answered in the affirmative, but the relationship is essentially ethical. Jesus' physical origin was not at all different from that of other men. The doctrine of the virgin birth is not an integral part of the New Testament records; in fact it is contradicted by the bulk of the Gospels as well as by the testimony of Paul's letters and the Acts. But Jesus' will so harmonized with the divine that the spirit dwelt in him without measure and thus he was the true Son of God—the supreme and crowning instance of the divine immanence. He is not essentially unlike other men in kind but vastly different from them in the degree of his divinity; hence "it is he and none besides who has for us the value of God."

It follows naturally that he was sinless, not because he was so born that he could not sin but because his choice of God was so absolute that he did not. That he must be a sinner if a regular member of humanity is not granted, since all theories about a historic "fall," original sin, and total depravity are foreign to the genius of modern thought. The ruling ideas of our age so discredit miracles that they can be accepted only on such evidence as may be regarded sufficient to substantiate other state-

ments in the field of history. When submitted to these tests Jesus' exercise of the gift of healing is found to be the historic basis for the miraculous element in the Gospels and all else is legend; but this power to heal did not differ in kind from that which other good men of his day possessed, and was dependent for its effect upon the patient's own mental attitude. All this Jesus himself understood and his primary purpose was not to display his power but to help the needy. Moreover, he shocked the religionists of his day by boldly declaring the forgiveness of sins. He felt authoritative in this respect since sin in his view was self-exile from God and could be entirely remedied by a return to God. By the helpful touch of his own personality Jesus awakened in men hope and trust toward the Father who cherished only a desire to pardon the repentant, and forgiveness resulted inevitably when one repented.

This is the effect of Jesus' influence both in the past and present—he causes sins to be forgiven by awakening in men the spirit of repentance. This surrender to his influence is what constitutes true belief in him and so is necessary to salvation, which is itself simply the soul's return to God. The process of salvation is twofold: an establishment of a filial attitude toward God, and a change of character in which the principle of self-giving takes the place of self-seeking; and for all this Jesus gives a new impulse by his precepts, by his example, and by his personality. This powerful personality was too great to be crushed by death; he certainly arose from the dead, not physically but spiritually, and manifested his triumph over death in unmistakable fashion to his followers. He had died because of loyalty to his own religious ideals, not to make it possible for an angry divinity to forgive, but to show how far self-giving love will go in its effort to help sinful men to see the Father aright. This voluntary self-offering of Jesus has been the greatest of all incentives to right living, "the chiefest of all redemptive forces." Did he die for us? Most assuredly, but his death has supreme significance because it is the climax of a life lived for us.

Such in outline is the content of this important book. It finds Jesus' chief significance in the realm of the ethical and spiritual, interpreting him in line with a metaphysical theory which views God's relation to the world in terms of immanence. Jesus was not an object for worship but the ideal religious man in whom divinity, which appears in others as a mere spark, glowed with full brilliancy. From this standpoint his supreme value for today lies in our knowing and appreciating the real character of his earthly life, and it is therefore important that we should know just what constituted the actual life-contest of the historical Jesus.

Many who are in sympathy with Warschauer's general attitude may feel that his treatment is weakest at this point; that is, he has assumed rather than proved that the content of Jesus' life was pervasively religio-ethical. But this is just the item in modern study about Jesus which is in sharpest debate. If it is his claim to messiahship in the eschatological sense, as some think, which gave him uniqueness for his associates, the more sober religious and ethical elements of gospel tradition, if indeed they are not secondary, are not the things that primarily characterized him. Perhaps a chapter on "Was Jesus the Messiah?" would have cleared up these uncertainties. One cannot be too careful in avoiding the temptation to make Jesus a kind of personification of modern religio-ethical ideals without sufficient regard for the actual facts which are attested by the history. Again, perhaps it is not altogether fortunate to attempt to discuss a modern interpretation of Jesus under the old captions. These do not furnish adequate categories for classifying the new ideas, while the desire to impress the reader with the full significance of the new conceptions may lead one to insert under the older terminology more than properly belongs there.

Sanday gives, in his first three lectures, a brief survey of christological speculation from the end of the Apostolic age down to comparatively recent times. This Christology is found to rest upon metaphysical speculation, emphasizing the notion of deity in Jesus and at the same time attempting to explain how his personality could be genuinely human. Readers of the present course will recognize, however, that there is an important stage in Christian thinking about Jesus during the Apostolic age when Jewish messianism preceded metaphysics as an instrument for measuring Jesus' religious worth for believers. Hence when the author insists upon setting metaphysics forward as the preferable mode of evaluating Jesus, and as preserving the historical continuity of Christian thinking, he overlooks the early period of Christianity when thought of Jesus proceeded from recollection of his historic personality and when a looked-for appearing in time was the chief fact in estimating his significance.

It is, however, the discussion of modern Christology (Lectures III-VIII) which gives the present book its chief value, for the closing lecture on symbolism is only remotely connected with the main theme. The Ritschlian interpretation of Jesus, which affirms that "God was in Christ" because of the actual impression made upon humanity by the life-work of Jesus, is approvingly noted. Yet this is held to be only

part of the truth. Some credal statement about the person of Christ, more independent of his earthly career, is felt by Sanday to be needed. In other words, he favors the effort to derive an estimate of Jesus from historical data without setting metaphysical speculation too prominently in the foreground, yet he refuses to abandon the traditional creeds which not only begin but end with metaphysics. This is another illustration of Sanday's well-known habit of following a view almost to the point of acceptance and then refusing to take the final step. Comparatively few writers deal so courteously and appreciatively with opinions which they are unable fully to approve.

Two tendencies in modern christological speculation are distinguished, and are termed "fuller" and "reduced." The former makes metaphysical speculation fundamental; the latter does not, but would restrict its thought more particularly to Jesus' historic personality. Sanday prefers the former method, and in working out positively his own interpretation resorts to a highly mystical explanation of Jesus' divine personality. The psychological notion of the subliminal self-consciousness is employed for this purpose. Starting with the idea that our impulses toward good all come out of the regions of the subconscious self—an idea which is by no means certain, however—we are asked to think of Jesus in terms of the dualistic self. In his conscious life he was purely human, but in the unconscious realm God was in him, and so there welled up from time to time into his consciousness thoughts and suggestions which truly manifest the divine in Christ. Thus he was both strictly human and also truly the incarnation of Deity.

One difficulty with all this speculation is the assumption that the unconscious self in any individual is less humanly conditioned than the conscious self. And then there is the moral difficulty of connecting the more valuable realities of spiritual life with the uncertain phases of subliminal mental activity rather than with conscious and normal mentality.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What types of metaphysical speculation have been used in the past to express Jesus' significance for believers?
2. What modifications of traditional Christology are made necessary by the historical criticism of the Gospels?
3. How does modern scientific and philosophical thinking affect traditional Christology?
4. What is the effect of modern psychology upon our thinking about Jesus' personality?

5. Was Jesus' chief worth for his disciples purely a matter of theoretical speculation, or a matter of personal historical experience?
6. Which is of primary importance for moderns, a theoretical explanation of Jesus' personality or an appreciation of his actual career upon earth?

ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

- P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*.
 W. A. Brown, *Christian Theology in Outline* (chap. xix).
 W. N. Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology* (pp. 285-321).
 R. Seeberg, *The Fundamental Truths of the Christian Religion* (pp. 211-32).
 W. Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God* (pp. 57-201).
 S. Mathews, *The Gospel and the Modern Man* (pp. 91-138).
 P. Gardner, *Modernity and the Churches* (chap. vii).
 E. S. Ames, *The Divinity of Christ*.

Forsyth contends for the traditional Christology; Brown and Clarke represent somewhat more liberal opinion; Seeberg is a "modern positivist," as those are called who take a middle ground between traditional orthodoxy and modern liberalism in Germany; Herrmann is one of the best-known modern representatives of Ritschlianism; Mathews endeavors to conserve for moderns the most valuable elements of religious thinking about Jesus; Gardner takes a more liberal and rationalistic attitude; Ames's work is a collection of six sermons from the standpoint of liberal thinking.